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Quicksilver: Paper of Politics And Barred Doors

By Liza Berconici

At 1736 R St. NW, the front doors are kept locked and barricaded 24 hours a day. The back doors are also under permanent lock. The first-floor windows are covered with chain-link fencing. The back-door windows are protected by iron grills. "Lock the door and TEST it everytime" says a sign on the back door. Visitors are not allowed unescorted beyond the main entrance.

This fortress is meant to deter police and neighborhood right-wingers from "no-knocks" at the home of the Quicksilver Times, Washington's underground newspaper. Security is tight because the level of paranoia is high.

"We think these doors are a deterrent to our being busted," says Steve Gale, 20, a long-haired drop-out from Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School who is the newspaper's chief photographer. "It should keep the police away, unless they come with grenades."

Rock music plays through the four-story house. Multi-colored revolutionary posters decorate the walls. Members of the collective stay in bed until 9:30 or 10. Work starts at noon. Business, breakfast and self-criticism sessions are conducted in the nude "because we are less defensive that way." At the completion of each issue, an event which occurs twice a month, staff members say they go off somewhere together for a "big acid trip."

At Quicksilver, paranoia and pleasure mix easily.

The heavy security exists in spite of the fact the collective has never been raided. But they remain on guard. Last year, another underground paper, the short-lived Washington Area Free Press, was raided by police searching for a picnic table and bench reportedly

stolen from the P Street Beach. (The bench was never found but the table was located in the newspaper's front yard).

Quicksilver is Washington's only underground newspaper. At one point there were as many as three undergrounds, with total circulation estimated as high as 37,000, but today, as Quicksilver marks its third anniversary as an underground, between 15,000 and 20,000 copies of the Quicksilver Times are printed twice a month in New York and distributed, according to one staffer, to an estimated 100 street vendors for sale here to tourists, "white drop-outs and potential drop-outs" on Georgetown's Wisconsin Avenue, on the Mall and in downtown Washington.

For 25 cents, the buyer comes away with a mixed bag of national underground news, a column from the medically-hip Dr. Hippocrates, community bulletin board news with advice on abortions and "bum drugs," a revolutionary comic strip, some local reporting. There is a fair amount of rhetoric, usually political, sometimes venomous and most often directed at police and "white middleclass machos," a far-ranging variety of sexists which, according to staffer Peggy O'Collaghan, may

range from Benjamin Spock to J. Edgar Hoover.

Quicksilver is a comparatively young newspaper by most underground standards. But in the past two years it has undergone a heady political evolution, from a free-swinging, politically-hip community newspaper with plenty of underground pornography to a heavily-ideological "communist" organ of the revolution.

"We're communists because we advocate the overthrow of capitalism and replacement with a communist structure," says 22-year-old Super Summer. He points out that communism as such should not be confused with "state capitalism, like in Russia. What we're talking about is what's going on in North Vietnam, Mainland China and Cuba."

The earliest Quicksilver editions ran step-by-step descriptions of how to synthesize mescaline, a potent psychedelic drug. Today the paper outlines procedures for ripping-off (stealing from) stores and runs a photo of a dead policeman with the caption, "And don't forget to . . ."

When Quicksilver was a struggling little underground with a circulation of 7,000 and playing second fiddle to its much larger underground cousin, the Free Press, there was talk of the paper one day publishing 64-page editions, circulating 60,000 papers a week, converting into a non-profit foundation, branching out into radio and television and sponsoring rock concerts in the streets.

The profits never materialized. Though Quicksilver is a tax-paying public corporation with establishment-type things like bank accounts and public stock, dividends are rare and talk about a budget brings on a puzzled reply that there is "no budget."

The Times was started by staffers of the now-deceased Washington Free Press who were dissatisfied with the "Free's" unbusinesslike structure and what Quicksilver saw as its wishywashiness on political issues.

One of the original founders of the paper — Steven Guss — was an insurance man who found radicalism a saleable product and wanted

a newspaper that was "radical" but with "no definite political line."

In April, 1970, the paper suspended publication for three weeks in a bitter staff dispute over the function of an underground newspaper.

By May, the paper had split between factions oriented toward the priorities of local community coverage on one hand, and those, on the other, favoring more international coverage of revolutionary movements, such as the NLF, Pathet Lao, Palestine Liberation Front and Latin American guerrillas.

After deciding to focus primarily on local affairs the present Quicksilver staff vacated their old headquarters at 1932 17th St. and opened up new offices at 1736 R St., off Dupont Circle. The dissidents, aligned unofficially with Weather-people (the term Weathermen is now verboten) politics, produced a new underground publication, Voice From the Mother Country, which lasted exactly three issues.

At Quicksilver, a staff collective, composed of five people, four men and one woman, was organized. Political views became more uniform. Discipline — and security — got tighter.

"As Communists," says Whalen, "your primary concern is not whether you want to do something or not. It's not for pleasure. You're not here to have a good time. You're here to build a revolution."

The collective's political consciousness is apocalyptic. Capitalism is crumbling. Revolution, says Quicksilver, is at our fingertips, if we will only seize the time. It is a politics fashioned from variations on Marxist-Leninist themes. "The revolution won't just be a workers' revolution, but the lumpen and streetpeople and middleclass freaks and blacks too," Steve Gale says.

By their own accounts, the newspaper collective uses Mao as frequently as Southern Baptists use the Bible. To gain membership in the collective, prior reading of certain Mao works is necessary — Combat Liberalism, for instance is mandatory.

Staff turnover is high. Only two people have been with the paper since it began, and two staffers have

"David — You
were right, I'm a
capitalist pig.
Please come home
and we'll work on
it. — Dad."